DARKNESS TO LIGHT
Isaiah 9:2-7
December 9, 1979

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

For us - the very, very fortunate, December is one of the most pleasant months of the year. "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire...children's faces all aglow." We do romanticize it a bit: it's been a while since I've seen a chestnut.December, nevertheless, is a warm and happy time of year, made even warmer and happier by crisp days and late afternoons growing quickly dark. But it has not always been so. In fact, in the context of the entire sweep of the human story, the reverse has been true. Ancient people feared December in the Northern Hemisphere. It was a time of anxiety, dread, worry. They didn't call it December, but at the time of year you and I are accustomed to throwing another log on the fire and enjoying the warmth of our homes, most of the human race in the past has been obsessed with the worst thing that could possibly happen - the sun was disappearing.

Those who developed careful observation skills noticed that it began in the middle of the best time, the days long and hot, the nights comfortable, growing things flourished. In the middle of that, the sun, source of it all, began to recede - to go away. The days grew a little shorter, and before long the air cooler and nights not so comfortable and growing things began to die, and animals hibernated. It continued relentlessly: the forces of chaos and suffering and death were obviously winning some kind of battle. The process appeared inexorable: soon all would be darkness: cold, deep, black.

And then one day, the same careful observers who noticed its subtle beginning six months earlier, recorded the end of the process and its reversal. Suddenly, one day was a few minutes longer instead of shorter, and the next and the next and the observers knew, even though the worst of the cold was still ahead, the sun was not going away any more. In fact, it was coming back.

Much human religion had its genesis around the dynamic of the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere. People knew that it had happened before; the sun had always returned. But there were no guarantees. There were no astronomers and mathematicians to explain. There was no rational reason to believe anything other than the obvious; namely, that whatever gods there were needed to be persuaded to alter this awful process. When it happened, there was profound gratitude, religious ceremony and sacrificial offering.

By the time of the Christian era, the festival was structured and stylized. Nobody much believed that the sun might actually go away, but the year-end celebration was retained. That is why we celebrate Christmas on December 25. Early Christians needed something to celebrate while their Roman neighbors pulled out all the stops, let their hair down and enjoyed a week long bash. That is the main reason for the December 25 date. However, the early Christians were quick to realize that in many ways the coming of Jesus Christ into the world was not unlike the event ancient people thought they perceived in the sun's return: the birth of hope, warmth, life, light...

Darkness is the elemental threat, the primal fear. In darkness, life is not possible. We may instill fear of darkness in our children for silly and superstitious reasons, but at least part of it is deeply embedded in the human memory from generations ago.

Darkness is also a metaphor. It is a convenient way to summarize a condition of total evil. It represents ignorance. People can't see in the dark: knowledge is impossible. When Barbarian hoards overran the Roman Empire and destroyed every vestige of civilization the ensuing one thousand year period is known as the "Dark Ages".

Our scripture lesson this morning, read all over the Christian world on this Second Sunday in Advent, uses the idea of darkness both to describe a very real historical situation but also in a broader, metaphorical sense. The situation was this. It was the middle of the Eighth Century B.C. and Judah was in trouble, threatened on the one hand by former allies who wanted to organize a military alliance, and on the other hand by Assyria, the dominant power in the region. Judean King Ahaz found himself under siege by his former friends because he wouldn't join their alliance. And so he sent emissaries to Assyria, promising loyalty and devotion, in essence surrendering independence in exchange for security.

Isaiah the prophet wrote the hauntingly beautiful words we heard this morning, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." It was a message to the King essentially. The prophet was suggesting that the right policy was neither to join the coalition nor to rely on Assyria, but to be calm. God (Immanuel) is with us. All will be well.

Biblical scholars tell us that these words may have been used ceremonially every time a new king was crowned. And of course, George Frederick Handel has borrowed the text for one of the most glorious choruses in the Messiah. "For unto us a child is born...a son is given...and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor..."

In its original context it is a word of assurance, to people who found themselves in a very difficult predicament. It was a promise that even though things were going very badly at the moment, God was still in control. Even though the darkness is descending, there is a source of unquenchable light. It is also an exhortation: peace and justice and righteousness are here celebrated as characteristics of God's reign. It is a vision of great poetic beauty, but also immediate relevance. Each age has its own brand of darkness. In the Eighth Century B.C. it was Assyria: two hundred years later Babylon was the definition of darkness. The Dark Ages point to ignorance: the great depression was certainly dark - as was December 7, 1941. Today we think about Iran, energy, nuclear escalation. We need a little light, frankly.

And yet, part of our national character is a cheerful optimism that simply cannot admit to darkness. Part of our culture is a belief in progress, and positiveness, and an undying confidence that tomorrow will be better than today if we work hard enough at it. Douglas John Hall, Canadian theologian, calls us the "Officially Optimistic Culture", and while there is certainly nothing wrong with optimism per se, when it becomes obsessive, when it simply pretends that there is no darkness, it is a delusion, a very dangerous distortion.

We are having a terrible time adjusting to the simple facts of life. We are using up all the world's oil. The people who have it don't want to sell it to us - but even if they did, it will be all gone in a very few years. We simply will not deal with that. It can't be true: someone isn't telling the truth...Whatever problems the auto industry is experiencing must therefore be the fault of the EPA or the labor unions - or somebody. We keep dismantling the decrepit remnants of a mass transit system at the very moment the oil producers are telling us they don't want our business. It is, I am convinced, part of our national character to be so optimistic that we simply will not acknowledge the fact that there may be some darkness to deal with.

Hall writes that we have "developed a kind of programmed indifference to the data of despair, particularly that associated with the polution of the environment. We are no longer shocked to learn that cormorants off the coast of California are now laying eggs with no shells at all..." (Lighten Our Darkness, p.65).

You cannot see a candle in the noon day sun. There is nothing more futile, meaningless than a flashlight in the daytime. People will not remedy wrong until they acknowledge that it is wrong. It is a deceptive, destructive ploy to keep assuring one another that all will be well if we simply keep telling one another that it is well.

There is a function of honest religion which might be described as pointing to the darkness, or leading us into the darkness - not for its own sake, not in some sick masochism. There is anough religion already which seems to enjoy rather thoroughly talking about human sin: there is enough religion playing on human guilt. Honest religion leads into the darkness, not because there is something good or admirable about darkness but precisely because you can't see the light until you know about the darkness. But, Hall suggests that Christianity is the official religion of the officially optimistic society: that we will rid Christianity of its honest analysis of the human condition if necessary in order to preserve our cheerful optimism. Hall quotes a despiser of the faith to the effect that going to most churches on Sunday morning is about like taking a tranquilizer, a quick trip to never-never land where everybody smiles and is pleasant; where everything is forward and up and progressing nicely. That would anger me, if I didn't believe it was true. We even clean up our crosses, eliminate the word sin from our vocabulary, keep our religion clear of all entanglements with messy controversy, with politics, economics and social policy.

There is enough darkness in the world. Surely on Sunday morning we can escape from it for a blessed hour or two. Every preacher who thinks and reads knows the power of that sentiment. He feels it himself. He knows that religion that is popular, either ignores darkness totally, or else simplifies and trivializes it so that becoming born again resolves it once and for all, which is somehow more of a delusion than not acknowledging it in the first place.

There is something to be said, however, for acknowledging the darkness. The philosopher Hegel once wrote, "Perhaps real faith, like real wisdom, can only occur at eventide." And in our generation Elie Wiesel determined not to let us forget that dark moment in history, the Holocaust, draws frequently on the metaphor of darkness and night. In The Town Beyond the Wall he wrote: "I know the paths of the soul, overgrown, often know only the night, a very vast, very barren night...And yet I tell you, we'll get out. The most glorious works of man are born of that night." (Hall, ob.cit.).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news: it is a very optimistic statement about the human prospect. Its optimism, however, is not constructed on a denial of evil, darkness, sin, but rather on the faith that there is a light in the darkness. That statement is meaningless if you don't believe there is any darkness. Optimistic religion has real trouble with forgiveness and grace because it knows no need for it.

The God of Christian faith, however, takes darkness very seriously. He enters into it and promises that He will be present even in the darkest of nights.

Light in the darkness remains one of the richest and most suggestive symbols with which to discuss God.Thus, the Psalmist, "Even though I walk through the valley..." The author of the Fourth Gospel used it eloquently in his prologue..."The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." And when, in several weeks we wish to do something to express the joy we feel at the mystery of the incarnation we will light candles and together dispel darkness in a ritual that is both lovely and theologically honest.

God's people are at their best when they are doing that. When they stand together and defiantly light candles in the darkness; when in the midst of political oppression, for instance, they keep alive the light of freedom and human dignity; when they hear about hungry people and then move to feed them; when they insist that poverty and

disease and injustice are not necessary, but stains on God's creation, placed there by us and therefore our responsibility to remove. God's people have always been at their very best - when they were lighting candles in the darkness.

We believe in a God who takes darkness seriously. His coming into the world, His Incarnation after all, did not happen in the brightly lighted throne room of the palace. That is how official optimism would have orchestrated it; at least in the royal nursery. What we celebrate happened at night - in the darkness, and for that I am profoundly grateful.

That means that God enters our darkness. It means that He enters those places in life which we regard as God-forsaken. He enters your darkness and mine: darkness of fear fear of inflation, fear of tomorrow, fear about getting older, fear of retirement, fear of death. God enters that darkness. The darkness of doubt - of the long nights of uncertainty when reasonable men and women wonder if, in fact, we are not alone in this vast empty universe; the darkness of pain, when we stand by someone with whom we've lived and laughed and cried and loved and watch pain take its devastating toll: God is in that darkness. Wherever you hurt: your relationship with your husband or wife, your children, your friends: your loneliness, your grief, your incessant anxiety: your frustration becaus your life is slipping through your fingers. Your pain is your darkness. God is in it with you and for you. And guilt - that darkest of all valleys which we traverse alone, into which we would introduce no one else; that place where we have hidden away our secret betrayals, the hurts we have inflicted on those we love: the unfaithfulness to ourselves and to God, that place we would be ashamed to have anyone else see - God is in that darkness.

That's where we need Him to be. We don't really need a celestial cheerleader who tells how fine we are and how much better we are becoming if we will simply keep smiling. We need a God who knows about darkness; who enters our darkness; who meets us in our darkness.

All of that is summed up in a lovely passage from Dorothy Sayers' nativity play That He Should Come. At the beginning the Magi come on stage and express their hope as they set out to follow the star. One of them says...

> "All I ask is the assurance that I am not alone, some courage,
> some comfort against this burden of fear and pain.
> I look out and see
> Fear in the east, fear in the west; armies
> And banners and garments rolled in blood.
> Yet this is nothing if only God will not be indifferent,
> If he is beside me, bearing the weight of his own creation;
> If I may hear his voice among the voices of the vanquished
> If I may feel his hand touch mine in the darkness..."
>
> (The Presbyterian Outlook, 12/10/79
> Two Plays About God and Man).

God is in the darkness. Because a child was born in the darkness of a stable we dare to believe that God enters our darkness, that there is a hand reaching for ours in the night...That is the Good News.

> "The people who walked in darkness have seen a
> great light...
> For to us a child is born,
> To us a son is given." Amen.

Almighty God, come into the darkness of our lives. Show us the truth. Give us courage to be honest with ourselves. And, our Father, in these days of Advent, help us to see the light, to trust in Your love; to be warmed by the grace and mystery and beauty of Bethlehem. Amen.